

Hi-Way not just a truck stop

Abrams area considers it place to meet

By Carol Kaufmann

Press-Gazette Correspondent

To the casual observer cruising along U.S. 41-141 near Abrams, the Hi-Way Restaurant and Fuel appears to be exactly what its name states — a place to fill stomachs and gas tanks.

But, it's much more, particularly to local residents.

"If people want to know when the band concert begins or when the strawberries will be ready to pick, they come here and ask. This really is a community reference point," said Ceil Vanden Langenberg, who with her husband, Don, founded the establishment, 14 miles north of Green Bay, 10 years ago.

"Don and I farmed near here, but he often said we'd open a restaurant. We bought this field (where the restaurant now stands) and grew crops on it until we were ready to start the restaurant," Ceil said. She still lives on the farm, about a mile away.

The Hi-Way Restaurant opened on April 16, 1982, and the gas station opened nearly a year later, in January 1983.

Six of the Vanden Langenbergs' nine children have worked in the family business. Their son John and his wife Brenda took over the business a little more than a year ago. John's nephew, Andy Bruskiewicz, 17, works in the gas station.

Hi-Way's employees also have perpetuated the business' family-restaurant atmosphere. "When we talk about this being a family place, it expands beyond our family," John said.

"Of the 67 employees we have here now, 42 have other family members currently working here, too, or family members who have been employees here in the past," Brenda said. "We also have four employees who have been with us the entire 10 years we've been open. That's quite a while in this type of business."

Don and Ceil operated the Hi-Way for nearly nine years before they decided to "retire" and turn the business over to John and Brenda.

About a month later, in February 1991, Don died.

"Don didn't really retire," Brenda recalled. "He said, 'I'm not going to retire. Just put me down as your janitor.' In fact he worked here until about 11 the night before he died."

"We still have people asking for him when they come through



Press-Gazette photo by Ken Behrend

Gas and good eating: Ceil Vanden Langenberg, her son John Vanden Langenberg, his wife Brenda and their children Robby,

5, and Kim, 3, are shown in their family business, the Hi-Way Restaurant and Fuel, Abrams.

All in the family

□ **Business:** Hi-Way Restaurant and Fuel.

□ **Address:** 2767 U.S. 41-141, Abrams.

□ **Family Members:** John Vanden Langenberg, 32, owner; Brenda Vanden Langenberg, 30, wife, co-owner; Ceil Vanden Langenberg, 67, mother, co-founder.

□ **Products/services:** Restaurant and gasoline sales.

this area. Don was such a fixture here. 'Where's that little guy who poured coffee?' they'll ask," she said.

Ceil also seems to be easing into retirement. "She'll say she's retired," Brenda said, "but she works about 56 hours a week."

John and Brenda lived in Appleton before moving to Abrams to take over the Hi-Way Restaurant and Fuel. As in John's parents' case — Don, who was a farmer and Ceil, who was a nurse — restaurant management wasn't John's or Brenda's first career either.

The younger Vanden Langenbergs met at the University of

Wisconsin-Madison, where John earned a degree as a mechanical engineer and Brenda graduated as a medical technologist.

John and Brenda agree they are happy with their career changes. And, the couple said, they intend to follow the elder Vanden Langenbergs' lead.

"My parents really established a foothold here and that's something we want to continue," John said.

Pies that people literally will drive — or fly — hundreds of miles to eat, and soup so thick that a spoon will remain standing in it are two menu favorites.

"We call some of our cooks the 'pie ladies' because that's what they do. They make the pies from scratch, including the crusts," John said.

"The pancakes also are from scratch and we only use real potatoes — not instant potatoes," Brenda said.

"One man put his spoon in the soup and it stayed standing. He told me that's a sign of a good soup," Ceil said.

"I know of some people who drove all the way from Milwaukee one Sunday morning after church. They came for our pies," Brenda said.

Another customer lands his helicopter on a clearing behind the restaurant. "He contracts his services checking power lines and stops by about once a month," John said.

"This really is a gathering point," Ceil said. "You'll see truckers, travelers and the locals in here all at once. It's a real mix. It's not unusual to see people in suits and ties at one table and farmers in overalls at the next table. People can come in by themselves and feel comfortable. They know they'll see someone they know here."

Brenda recently added a third business to the complex — Van Jantzen Real Estate. She had sold real estate in Appleton.

"People would come in here, talking about looking for a place to live. I saw a need for it (a real estate agency). This is a growing spot and there's not another real estate business in the area," Brenda said.

The Hi-Way Restaurant and Fuel is open around-the-clock, only closing for a brief time during the Christmas holiday.

If you have suggestions for a business family to be featured, call Julie Phillippi at 431-8218.